

Q&A: A Conversation With Maryam Monsef

Policy Editor L. Ian MacDonald sat down with Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef in her Centre Block office on October 5. The conversation touched on referendums, the possibility of a consensus in the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, whether the Liberals would use their majority to impose a preferred outcome, mandatory and electronic voting, and her thoughts on the response of Canadians to the revelation that she was born in Iran rather than Afghanistan.

Policy: Minister Monsef, thank you for doing this. What are you seeing out there in the country? You've been from one end to the other on your tour. What are you seeing and hearing about democratic reform?

Maryam Monsef: What I'm seeing is a breathtaking country. Mountains and oceans and waterfalls and tundra and agricultural land and so much wealth and so many natural resources that we have to take really good care of. I'm seeing people from all walks of life who... some come in reluctant or skeptical, rather, at the beginning of the conversation, and they leave, heard and hopeful, that their government genuinely wants to hear from them.

Policy: And what's the level of interest? Is it really where Darryl Bricker had it in the Ipsos poll—only one Canadian in five had heard of electoral reform, and only 3.5 per cent were following the work of the committee? I think you called these people the democra-geeks.

Maryam Monsef: You heard about that, eh? So that term was affectionately coined by a group of young democra-geeks that I met just before we launched the tour. And this is a

group of young Canadians who for years have been meeting every summer at someone's cottage to talk about the state of their democracy. And this year they invited me. And I had the great privilege—

Policy: Did they have some beer?

Maryam Monsef: There was no time for beer! We had so much to talk about. And the quality of conversations is invaluable, especially with young people, who for 10 years, have felt like the doors of their government were shut to them. Suddenly, we're going to them and asking them how we can increase their participation and how we can be more relevant and responsive to them, and they're hopeful. So—I totally understand that it's a time of relative peace and stability. There is no major crisis happening in this country, and people, for the most part, are focused on jobs and raising their kids, and focusing on their grandkids, and I'm thankful to those who do come out and advocate on behalf of those who face barriers when entering those rooms.

Policy: Do you find there's a difference in tone between the quote/unquote expert testimony you hear in this building during/before the com-

mittee and what you're seeing outside among the voices of the people in the country?

Maryam Monsef: I have a lot of respect for the experts and academics. Many have dedicated their lives to this, and we can't do this work without them. But there's a reason the prime minister asked me to go and connect with Canadians in every province and every territory, because the quality of conversation, the realities that everyday Canadians experience, whether it's in Iqaluit or Whitehorse or in places like Winnipeg or Saturna, they are different than the realities we experience here in the Ottawa bubble.

Policy: Right. The special committee's road show, you have 12 people spending a month together on the road, and then another month in a room writing up their recommendations. What's your sense of the chemistry of this group?

Maryam Monsef: So the composition of this committee is really important. Form is important when it comes to function, and so the composition of this committee, the only committee in the House of Commons where the Opposition actually has the majority, is really important. We made a decision to listen to Canadians who said there's a better way to compose the committee. We heard from opposition parties, and we wanted to send a signal that, for electoral reform to work, for it to move forward, we're going to have to take a collaborative and cooperative approach.

I'm so proud that the spirit in which the committee was composed continues. I watched some of their deliberations when they were aired on CPAC, and I hear anecdotes here and there.

They seem to be getting to know each other well. And I hope that that same spirit of cooperation will be reflected in the final outcome.

Policy: I should say they also have an exceptional chair in Francis Scarpaleggia.

Maryam Monsef: They do, and every single person around that table has worked really hard throughout the summer. They were in electoral reform boot camp before the road show began. Every single one of them brings a wealth of knowledge and experience, and certainly the chair's leadership has been really important for maintaining that right tone.

Policy: And we should point out that the special committee of 12 with seven Opposition members is distinct from a standing committee of 10 at which the Liberals would normally have a majority of six, right?

Maryam Monsef: Correct.

Policy: So if there is an all-party consensus, the Conservatives would obviously demand a referendum as their bottom line. And perhaps all opposition parties might agree on that as kind of the price of the deal if there is, you know, a deal to be made on something like mixed member proportional or something. Where do you think the cutting edge of the deal might be?

Maryam Monsef: You're asking me if I have a crystal ball...and you're asking me to look into it, and I sure wish I had one. Look, I have a lot of confidence in this committee. And I know that they're working really hard on behalf of Canadians. They're taking into account, naturally, the values that each party has brought to this House. And I've asked them for one report as opposed to each party providing their own minority report.

The question of a referendum has certainly come up from our colleagues in the Conservative caucus. And I personally don't believe that a referendum is the best way to make a decision about complex public policy issues like this. Is it one way to seek broad support

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from Canadians? Sure. Is it the best way? I have yet to be convinced.

Policy: Well the *New York Times* agrees with you. In a major story on page 1 today, the headline is: “Why national referendums are messy tools of democracy.” You probably could have written that headline.

Maryam Monsef: They have a tendency to be costly in ways beyond financial, right? They can cause divisions in communities. And this government is more concerned and more interested in building community and a sense of national cohesion.

Policy: Well, the article points out that people sometimes vote in referendums on leadership rather than on the issue that's on the table, as in Britain, for example, in the Brexit referendum sending a message to Mr. Cameron, as they certainly did. Forty-eight hours later, he was gone. We've just been through the Colombia experience, where a referendum to ratify a treaty ending a 52-year civil war was narrowly defeated. And I lived through the Quebec referendum in 1995 when we came within 1.2 percentage points of losing our country over a question hardly anybody understood. So there are cautions about referendums out there.

Maryam Monsef: Absolutely, there are, and referenda on electoral reform have seen about half of the population participating in the past. And what about the other half?

So all of that said, this isn't about my personal opinion. And what the prime minister has asked me to do is to enter this process with an open mind. And if, at the end of really thoughtful

deliberations, the committee comes back and makes a recommendation with a referendum being that tool that we use to determine whether or not their proposed reforms have the support of Canadians then we have to take that seriously.

Policy: If there's no consensus in the committee, would the government rule out using cabinet and its majority in the House to impose a preference of its own?

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Maryam Monsef: So there are two parts to this question. Firstly, as I mentioned, I have a lot of confidence in the people who are on this committee, and I do believe that they will work hard to come up with something that will serve the best interests of Canadians and that everybody can live with.

We will not move forward with any reforms without the broad support of Canadians. So no, we are not interested in leveraging our majority in this place to move any reforms forward because this is not about us. This is



Monsef says that while Canadians are open to e-voting “the common theme across the country is ‘do not mess with the paper ballot.’” House of Commons photo

for Canadians, and if at the end of the day we have an electoral system that doesn’t have their buy-in then why are we doing this?

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Policy: There’s a lot of alphabet soup, as you know, from FPTP to SMP to PR to PPR to MMP to MSMP. Is it possible people find it’s confusing and that first-past-the-post it’s the devil they know?

Maryam Monsef: We talk about this in town halls that for some democrats, FPTP and STV and MMP and so on, it’s an opportunity to have a delightful conversation about the details of different systems out there. But other nations that have taken on the noble pursuit of electoral reform, the research that’s out there, it shows that the best way to enter a conversation about electoral reform isn’t through the technical aspects of any given system; it’s through a set of principles. There’s no perfect system.

The process itself is highly subjective because our democratic institutions and our vote, our right to vote, is so deeply connected to our sense of identity. And so it’s about a set of values and a set of principles, and that’s why the committee—and myself—are framing this conversation with Canadians around a set of principles, which they easily engage in.

Policy: The government has a timeline of having a proposal in place within 18 months of taking office, so by next May 4th. Is this cast in stone? Because a lot of people think this deadline is unrealistic.

Maryam Monsef: Well, this is a deadline that the House voted on, and it has been agreed upon, and the committee has been asked to provide us with a report on December 1st, and we’ll be introducing legislation in the House in May. And I believe that if we continue to work as diligently as we have, if the committee continues to work as collaboratively as they have, then we will meet this timeline and we’ll be able to give Elections Canada the time they need to implement the changes.

Policy: That’s interesting because as you know, Marc Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer, at his final news conference on October 4th, expressed his own doubts about the achievability

ity of the May 4 deadline. And he also referred to New Zealand requiring the support of either 75 per cent of the House or a referendum.

So I guess there's two parts to this question, too. Could you comment on his thoughts about the achievability of the deadline?

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Maryam Monsef: I think there's three parts to this question because I can't talk about Mr. Mayrand without acknowledging the tremendous leadership and service that he's offered to our country. Some of the really innovative work that he's done, some of the interesting pilot projects like having polling stations on post-secondary campuses. His advisory group on persons with disabilities. These achievements I hear about on the road across the country, so I just need to acknowledge his great work.

And we have a lot of lessons to learn from places like Australia and New Zealand and Estonia and Germany—other nations that have taken on electoral reform. But Canada is not those countries. And certainly we have a prime minister who is ambitious, who dreams big and gets things done. And so I believe where there's a will there's a way, in the same way that, at first, they said the Syrian refugees, the timeline just simply was not enough. Well, we were able to make really good things happen with support from the public service and come really close to that timeline. So, I be-

lieve that we're on the right track, and if we keep going like this, we should be able to provide Elections Canada with the time they need.

Policy: If the road to reform becomes some kind of modified partial proportional representation or MMP or something like that, there's generally a threshold level for parties to get members' seats, usually around five per cent. Are you on board with that?

“ If you ask me, what ingredients do Canadians want their electoral system to be made up of, I can talk to you about that. I can tell you that Canadians—loud and clear—have said that maintaining their connection to their local representative is critical. ”

Maryam Monsef: So I'm not there. So you're going into details that I don't think we're quite there yet. You want to ask me my principles? If you ask me, what ingredients do Canadians want their electoral system to be made up of, I can talk to you about that. I can tell you that Canadians—loud and clear—have said that maintaining their connection to their local representative is critical. And everywhere I go, people talk about the importance of inclusion and accessibility in our voting system so that we stop leaving behind the same groups of people—that we allow them an opportunity to fully participate in our democratic institutions. And they want us to maintain the integrity of the system that we have. This... I can speak about with you, but the details about the design, we have a really thoughtful group of parliamentarians who are working on the committee to do just that, and I'm going to wait for their report before I get into those details.

Policy: One of the things the government has asked the committee to look at is mandatory voting and as well as electronic voting. Can you address those two?

Maryam Monsef: Sure. So, both of those get groups really worked up, whether it's online or in town halls or in our more private meetings behind closed doors. There are some who say mandatory voting is one way to increase participation and engagement.

Policy: Although in Australia you can spoil your ballot.

Maryam Monsef: You can, and in Australia you can show up and not vote, and that showing up is mandatory. There's some people who have a lot of fun with this question of mandatory voting and say: incentives. Instead of penalizing people, why don't you consider giving incentives, like tax breaks? And then there are some who say, you know what, making voting mandatory is not going to get to the heart of why people don't vote. People don't vote because they're either disillusioned or apathetic or they're just too busy. And so perhaps, one way to address that is through information, and expanding the role of the Chief Electoral Officer to help with increasing people's understanding of election time and place that the voting is going to take place.

People talk about some interesting ideas, like a weekend or a holiday dedicated to voting as a way of increasing engagement. People talk about how important it is to have a diverse range of candidates put their name on the ballot. I hear from all sorts of different groups, whether it's new Canadians or indigenous youth or LGBTQ representatives who say 'one of the reasons our communities don't vote is because we don't see people like us in that place. We don't hear our voices in that place.' And so that is something that we need to address.

As far as online voting goes, Canadians are doing their shopping online. They're doing their banking online. In some municipalities they're even voting online. And so they recognize

that we need to consider it. They recognize that for many of us, voting online is a luxury. But for those with mobility issues, for those who aren't able to leave the house for whatever reasons, online voting is not a nice-to-have; it's a must have.

So here's where Canadians are such reasonable people. They also understand that while online voting would increase accessibility, the integrity of the vote needs to be maintained. And so they want us to do research, they want us to make it happen, but they're nervous about the stories they hear, with the integrity of the vote being compromised.

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Policy: So there are cybersecurity issues around this.

Maryam Monsef: Yes. And Canadians—I think there are two issues with online voting. One is, is the technology there? And I think that—and we were at a conference just a couple of weeks ago with e-Democracy and McMaster, for example, and I think it was Ottawa U, they were hosting a symposium on just this. And I shared with

them: I think there are two things. One is, do we have the technological capacity to make this happen? And if we don't have it right now, I do believe that there's a young person in a basement somewhere working on that technology as we speak, and we will see it very, very soon.

But the second piece is public perception. Canadians want to make sure that they can continue to benefit from the secrecy of the vote. They want to make sure that we can still verify the vote. They want to make sure that there is an audit trail so that if there's a need for a recount, that can happen. They're concerned about the possibility of coercion. That if there's a woman, for example, who lives with—in a violent situation, her partner could intimidate her into voting a certain way. And so balancing the integrity of the vote with the accessibility that online voting provides is a really interesting conversation that Canadians are having.

But the common theme across the country is, “do not mess with the paper ballot”. You can add more options to increase accessibility, but people like going to the polling station and waiting in line and meeting their neighbours and having a conversation, and that piece of paper and that pencil, there's something about that ritual in a country like ours where we don't have many rituals that we can all take part in. There's something about that ritual that is sacred and Canadians want to maintain. For 18-year-olds, in a country where there is no rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood, casting that ballot becomes a really important rite of passage. And in every province and territory, I have been asked to, please, do not take away the paper ballot.

Policy: You know, talking about turnout, it has increased from 2008, a record low of 59 per cent, to 68 per cent in 2015. Partly I think because of the fixed election date being the third Monday in October, a week after the advance poll over Thanksgiving weekend, when people are together and

talking about this around the family table. And the turnout in the advance poll last October was nearly 21 per cent of the total vote.

Maryam Monsef: It was high.

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Policy: It was way up. In my voting station in Montreal, people were lined up out onto the street as families at the advance poll.

Maryam Monsef: Same in Peterborough-Kawartha, my riding.

Policy: You came to this country as a refugee with your mother and your sisters, and here you are at the age of 31, responsible for how the country elects the next Parliament. What does that tell you about Canada as a country?

Maryam Monsef: This is a great country. Somebody like me comes here, has the privileges and opportunities to represent a community that supported her that's nurtured her in the House of Commons, but we also have a prime minister who says, here's a really important file, I want you to go listen to Canadians and come back with something meaningful. This is a great country.

And this path I'm walking on, it's been paved for me by a lot of women and men who have worked really hard. Some have given up their lives to protect it. And then the Famous Five statue (on the Hill) every day is a constant reminder of the hard work those women did and their allies did to make sure that women could even vote.


So what does that say about Canada and what does that say about our democratic institutions? They've served us well, those institutions. And if we want them to continue to be relevant, if we want to make sure that we take a responsible and proactive approach at a time of peace and stability, like now, to look at them seriously, come up with ways to modernize them, maintain what's working, then we make sure that we protect this incredible country and these democratic institutions for the next generation, so that the next generation of Canadians who are going to take these seats, benefit from the same opportunities and privileges, and take things one step further.

Policy: How did the Monsef women end up in Peterborough anyway?

Maryam Monsef: My uncle lived in Peterborough at the time. And so it makes sense to go to a place where you know someone who speaks your language who can help show you around and get you settled in. But I don't think that's the question. The question is what kept us in Peterborough? Because I certainly—I'm pretty sure I cried every night for that first year, just wanting to go back to the families we left behind, to the familiarity, and I didn't speak the language, I didn't understand the culture. I was bullied. But what kept us in Peterborough was a really welcoming community. Some kids can be unkind and even cruel sometimes, and an 11-year-old doesn't really understand that. But the 11-year-old in me understood deeply the kindness of strangers when people who couldn't even communicate with us were going out of their way to make sure that we felt like we belonged, that we could start

a new life in Peterborough. So that's what kept us in Peterborough.

Policy: And Peterborough is quintessentially Canadian because as you know it is the home of focus groups in Canada.

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Maryam Monsef: That's right.

Policy: Where, as you know, a lot of public opinion research is done there, and not by accident.

Maryam Monsef: No. We have a really interesting demographic, and everything I've learned about democracy I've learned in Peterborough. What I've learned about the importance of grassroots and community being at the heart of a healthy democracy, I've learned it in Peterborough. What I've learned about the importance of listening to people before making decisions as elected officials, I've learned in Peterborough. I have mentors there who have taught me that, before you start a town hall or any conversation where you're seeking opinion, it's really important to ask who's not in the room. And it's really important to remind the people in the room to not just advocate on their own behalf but on behalf of their neighbours and friends and colleagues who couldn't be in the room. That's Peterborough.

Policy: What have the last couple of weeks, in terms of your birth place being Iran rather than Afghanistan, told you about the kindness of Canadians and the kindness of strangers?

Maryam Monsef: My inboxes, my social media platforms, my physical mailboxes are filled with letters and notes and comments from people who have shared their family stories, some similar to mine more than others, and who've said you are a Canadian. What matters to us is that you were born and that you came here, and that you do a good job with this file you've been tasked with. And look, I think this is the greatest country in the world, and as difficult as the last couple of weeks have been for me and my family, it's renewed... it's rekindled the fire in the belly that motivated me to run for office in the first place. And so I am grateful for all the people who helped rekindle that fire.

And I learned—the revelation I learned about, essentially at the same time as the rest of Canada. And while there is some privilege in privacy, I can tell you that knowing that my story is a common story in Canada, knowing that I am not alone, and knowing that more people are now connecting with me in this place as their minister for democratic institutions—that goes a really long way in motivating me to continue the work that I'm doing. **P**